

Short Communication

A previously unpublished record of *Liphyra brassolis* Westwood, 1864 (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae: Miletinae) from Vella Lavella, New Georgia group, Solomon Islands

W. JOHN TENNENT

Department of Entomology, The Natural History Museum, London SW7 5BD, ENGLAND
jstornment@googlemail.com

In transcribing letters written between 1894 and 1931 by English explorer/naturalist/collector Albert Stewart Meek (1871–1943) to the staff of Rothschild's museum at Tring, Hertfordshire, England, references were noted regarding a sighting (but not capture) of the miletine lycaenid butterfly *Liphyra brassolis* Westwood, 1864, on the island of Vella Lavella (New Georgia group), Solomon Islands. *Liphyra brassolis* has not previously been recorded from this island (Tennent 2002).

Liphyra brassolis occurs from northern India and Thailand, through the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, the Philippines to Australia, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Two subspecies are known to occur in the Solomons Archipelago: *L. brassolis bongainvilleana* Samson and Smart, 1980 (Bougainville, Papua New Guinea; Faisi, Shortland group) and *L. brassolis salomonis* Samson and Smart, 1980 (Rendova, New Georgia group; Russell group; Guadalcanal, Florida, San Cristobal) (Tennent 2006). The few specimens known from the Solomon Islands, and its widespread but local distribution, almost certainly reflect the fact that adults are seldom observed, probably due at least in part to their crepuscular habits. *Liphyra brassolis* is more likely to be found by examining the nests of the green tree ant *Oecophylla smaragdina* Fabricius for larvae/pupae.

The only published record of this species from islands of the New Georgia group is a solitary specimen caught by A.S. Meek on Rendova in February 1904. However, in a letter written to Rothschild's Lepidoptera curator, Karl Jordan, in March 1908, Meek said: "I saw one very fine butterfly on Vella Lavella. I forget the name of the Queensland form. It is like a very large skipper. Mr Dodd of Kururnda published an article on its life history, in which he says it feeds in the nests of the green tree ant. The insect I saw was larger than either Queensland or New Guinea forms. I think I've taken about two specimens altogether in latter place. It also appeared to have lighter red markings. It was hovering over one particularly thorny tree. I'm sorry now I didn't shoot it" (Meek 1908a).

The question of shooting the specimen, rather than the rather more conventional use of a net, is not as bizarre as it might sound. Several historically important birdwing butterflies were collected by shooting them (Ackery 1997; Tennent 1997, 1999) with mustard seed or dust shot

cartridges designed for shooting small birds at short range without causing damage to the plumage (Mearns and Mearns 1998).

Even if the description provided by Meek did not obviously refer to *Liphyra* – which it clearly does – reference to Dodd's publications five years earlier (Dodd 1902, 1903) removes any doubt. In another letter, to Tring's ornithological curator Ernst Hartert later in 1908, Meek voiced his disappointment at the meagre number of birds collected on Vella Lavella, and added: "If I'd been able to get that butterfly I saw (*Liphyra Brassiolis* [sic] of Queensland) I should have felt more satisfied" (Meek 1908b).

REFERENCES

- Ackery, P.R. 1997. The Natural History Museum collection of *Ornithoptera* (birdwing) butterflies (Lepidoptera: Papilionidae). *The Biology Curator* 8: 11–17.
- Dodd, F.P. 1902. Contribution to the life-history of *Liphyra brassolis*. Westw., *The Entomologist* 35 (469): 153–156, (470): 184–188, pl. 4.
- Dodd, F.P. 1903. The young larva of *Liphyra brassolis*, Westw., *The Entomologist* 36 (483): 211–212.
- Meek, A.S. 1908a. Letter to Karl Jordan dated 29th March 1908 from Gizo, Solomon Islands. Meek letter 207, BMNH Archives. Unpublished.
- Meek, A.S., 1908b. Letter to Ernst Hartert dated 12th August 1908 from on board the vessel "Shamrock", Samarai, British New Guinea. Meek letter 213, BMNH Archives. Unpublished.
- Samson, C. and Smart, P. 1980. A review of the genus *Liphyra* (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae) of Indo-Australia, with descriptions of two new subspecies from the Solomon Archipelago. *Aurelian, Beckley* 1 (4): 6–16.
- Tennent, W.J. 1997. The type locality of *Ornithoptera victoriae* Gray, 1856, and the circumstances of the capture of the holotype female (Lepidoptera, Rhopalocera). *Archives of Natural History* 24 (2): 163–173.
- Tennent, W. J. 1999. Charles Morris Woodford C.M.G. (1852–1927): Pacific adventurer and forgotten Solomon Islands naturalist. *Archives of Natural History* 26 (3): 419–432.
- Tennent, W.J. 2002. *Butterflies of the Solomon Islands: systematics and biogeography*. Storm Entomological Publications: Dereham, England.
- Tennent, W.J. 2006. A checklist of the butterflies of Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia and some adjacent areas. *Zootaxa* 1178: 1–209

